

Augusta Mental Health Institute, 1840–2004



After 164 years of continuously serving the needs of Maine's most seriously mentally ill, the Augusta Mental Health Institute closed in June of 2004. The oldest psychiatric hospital in Maine, and among the oldest in the nation, the institute first opened its doors in 1840 as the Maine Insane Hospital. Like most state hospitals, the Augusta Mental Health Institute grew over the years, and it peaked at a census of 1,800 in 1958. In recent years it continued to serve approximately 100 patients on units in the original granite structure pictured here.

The institute was associated with several prominent figures in American psychiatry. The first medical superintendent was Isaac Ray, M.D., an obscure, 31-year-old general practitioner in rural Eastport, Me., when he published his authoritative "A Treatise on the Medical Jurisprudence of Insanity." It was during his years at the Augusta Mental Health Institute that Ray joined with the leaders of 12 other hospitals at the inaugural meeting of the Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutions for the Insane, the forerunner of APA, in Philadelphia. Ironically, it was Ray's close professional friend and Maine native, Dorothea Lynde Dix, who was most instrumental in arranging

for him to leave the Augusta Mental Health Institute in 1845. Miss Dix, early in her remarkable career as a social reformer, convinced Ray to plan and then become the first superintendent of Butler Hospital in Rhode Island (1).

A new 92-bed replacement hospital, Riverview Psychiatric Center, was opened in June of 2004 on the campus of the former institute. It is now considered state of the art for this century, and the state of Maine, in collaboration with its academic affiliate, Dartmouth Medical School, hopes to carry on the tradition of Ray, Dix, and countless others in providing humane care, training, and research for its mentally ill citizens.

Reference

1. Barton WE: The History and Influence of the American Psychiatric Association. Washington, DC, American Psychiatric Press, 1987, pp 62, 315

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